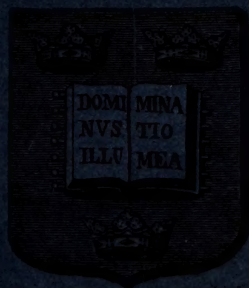
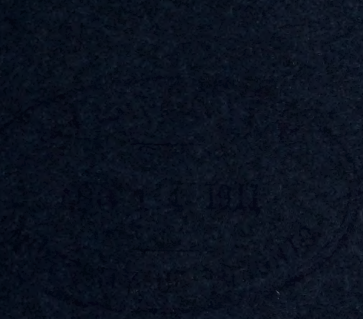


THE HOLY SEPULCHRE

BY
W. H. SAVILE, M.A.



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THE
HOLY SEPULCHRE

THE TRIENNIAL PRIZE POEM
ON A SACRED SUBJECT IN THE
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD, 1911

BY

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*As toil-worn Pilgrims at the close of day,
Crossing the golden plains for Palestine,
With far-off visions of the Holy Shrine
Were cheered and solaced on their lonely way;
So I, who have adventured to assay
A theme so fraught with memories divine,
Have won much joy from this long task of mine;
Yet am I therewithal content? Ah, nay!
I know too well the blemishes which mar
My song that flags and falters in its flight:
But far above my best endeavour, far
Beyond my capture, on the distant height,
In shining beauty like a perfect star
I see the Poem I shall never write!*

“ Da nobis, Domine, ut sicut in mortem beatissimi Filii tui Jesu Christi, Salvatoris nostri baptizati sumus, ita, concupiscentiam semper mortificando, cum Illo consepeliamur : et per Sepulchrum et mortis portam in resurrectionis gaudium transeamus. Propter ejusdem merita, qui pro nobis et mortuus et sepultus est et resurrexit, Filii tui Jesu Christi Domini nostri.”

THE HOLY SEPULCHRE.

“ ALL are God’s gifts ; these rare and fragrant blooms,
Snow-white and saffron-hued like evening skies ;—
This garden with its cedar-scented glooms,
And rustlings as the soft breeze wakes and dies,—
His gifts ! and one there is who knows how sweet,
After the labours of the Sanhedrim,
To fill the cup of leisure to the brim,
And praise the Giver in this green retreat.

“ Riches are mine to squander, or to spend
On self, or on the brethren who have not :
O make me, Lord, Thine almoner, the friend
Of Thine own poor who bear so hard a lot !
Yea let me serve Thee till the long day close ;
And may I then by pious hands be laid
Deep in this rock’s inviolable shade ;
Here, Angel-guarded, let my dust repose.

"Strange! that at times my spirit is aware
 As of an unseen Presence at my side :
 A worn Face, unimaginably fair,
 Once in the silence of the eventide
 Did haunt me as I took the Sacred Roll
 And read therein the prophecy which saith,—
He with the rich man made His grave in Death.
 Oft as I ponder on that mystic scroll

"I know my God hath yet in store for me
 Some high vocation, some supreme event."
 He rose, and through the branches of the tree
 The sunlight played about him as he went ;—
 Joseph the just man, pure in heart and lip,
 Like Nicodemus, waiting for the Light ;
 A friend of God, already in His sight
 Wearing the crown of Love's discipleship.

Each year this quiet, sheltered paradise,
 Home of his heart, beyond the City wall,
 Was decked with richer beauty in his eyes ;
 And in the most sequestered spot of all,
 Where coronals of ivy trailing loose
 In wild profusion wove their green festoon
 Around the rock, a sepulchre was hewn,
 And waited ready for the master's use.

But evermore the stately cedars kept
 Their own deep secret ; leaf and herb and flower
 By seraphs' wings invisible were swept
 In the hot noon and in the twilight hour.
 And when at early morn the chequered sward
 Lay fresh beneath the silver-sparkling dew,
 The clustered ranks of bending lilies knew
 Their chalices were holy to the Lord.

For here the very Life of Life hath willed,
 When He hath tasted Death for every man,
 And (Law and Type and Prophecy fulfilled)
 The Victim slain before the world began
 Hath borne the guilt of our enfranchised race ;—
 When to the Father's Hands He hath commended
 His parting Spirit, all His Passion ended,—
 To lay His sacred Body for a space.

And here from bitter Calvary He came,
 By loving hands borne hither to His rest
 In the still evening, as the dying flame
 Of sunset lingered on the hill's dark crest.
 O flowers of God ! your tender petals close,
 And breathe your sweetest on the hallowed air
 Around His Grave, the fairest of the fair,
 Himself Earth's whitest Lily, Sharon's Rose.

All day God's Earth hath rung with Hell's hoarse cries,
 Loud as the surging of an angry sea :
 Now worn and spent the weary City lies,
 Hushed by the spell of Night's tranquillity.
 Silence descends, a silence long and deep,
 On Herod's Palace, Pilate's Judgment Hall ;
 And silver-clear the Paschal moonbeams fall
 Where God hath given His Belovèd sleep.

Still are the tireless Hands that healed and blessed,
 And toiled and wrought for love of humankind ;—
 Upheld the weak and succoured the oppressed,—
 Unveiled a world of beauty to the blind.
 Still are the Feet that oft, how oft ! have trod
 The burning plain, the stony mountain track,
 To seek the lost and lead the wanderer back
 With joy and singing to the Fold of God.

Take now Thy rest, O Thou Who from the Fight
 Hast come victorious with Thy Passion scars ;
 Watched, through the balmy vigils of the night,
 Tenderly watched by companies of stars.
 And though the hearts that love Thee most must weep
 Alone awhile, at Daybreak they will bring
 Their store of spices for Thy Burying :
 Sleep till the Morning, God's Belovèd, sleep !

The Life Thou freely gavest unto Death,
 Drawing thereby the venom from his sting,—
 Its beauty wasteth not nor withereth :
 No touch of the corruptible shall cling
 To that pure Robe of Flesh Thy Godhead wore,
 Abhorring not the lowly Virgin's womb :
 Fragrance of myrrh and aloes fills Thy Tomb
 Whose Death hath conquered Death for evermore.

But while the solemn lights and shadows play
 Round Thy swathed Limbs in their august repose,
 Thy Soul along a lone, mysterious way
 Speeds on its embassy of Love to those
 Unnumbered hosts in Hades' realms who wait,
 With voiceless longing in their wistful eyes,
 To see the Daystar on their dimness rise,
 And hear Thy Voice roll back their prison gate.

Prophets and Kings who have desired to see
 The things which we see, and who have not seen ;
 Seers of a lasting Kingdom yet to be,
 Singers and saints of kingdoms that have been ;
 Holy and humble men of heart who kept,
 Like lonely stars throughout the long, dark night,
 The lamp of Prayer and quenchless Hope alight,—
 Watched for the Bridegroom's coming while men slept ;

Souls out of all the ages, men of strife

Who rushed on Death, red-handed and unshriven,—
The outcast waifs and storm-tossed wrecks of life

To whom but few stray gleams of light were given ;—
Spent fires ! but having still some spark divine

Thy tender touch could kindle into flame ;—

To each the message of Salvation came ;
On every face Thine own fair Face did shine.

All day from Sion's Temple-precincts rise

The festal voices of the Sabbath-Pasch :

The priest before the smoking sacrifice

Stands with bared feet at his allotted task :

All day beside the Sepulchre, safe-barr'd

From subtle, stealthy hands by stone and seal,

The glint of sunlight on the shining steel,

And measured tramping of the Roman guard.

But not thy care, O Caiaphas, nor twice

Ten thousand legions can avail to stay,

Nor any cunning art of man's device,

The Lord of Life on His triumphant way.

The powers of this world, earth with Hell allied,

Are as the crumbling battlements of sand :—

The proud achievement of some tiny hand

To stem the mighty inrush of the tide.

O quiet Garden, in thy trees and flowers
 Hiding the world's great Secret, did'st thou hear
 The stir and movement of immortal Powers,
 The sound of some far Footstep drawing near?
 Did'st thou behold beneath the cypress gloom,
 Betwixt the midnight and the Dawn's chill breath,
 The pallid form of terror-haunted Death
 Glide with averted eyes from that still Tomb?

Garden of God's Belovèd, chosen out
 Of all th' illimitable universe
 For that which now His Hand shall bring about,—
 On thee, a second Eden, lies no curse:
 No Cherubim with sword-flame flashing bright
 To guard thy Tree whose Fruit doth heal and save!
 But in the doorway of the empty Grave
 An Angel sits in raiment dazzling white.

Oh! how shall faltering human lips re-tell
 The mighty theme, the triumph of Christ Risen,—
 The Stone rolled back, the speechless fear which fell
 On those who watched,—the bursting of the prison;—
 The Majesty of that victorious Brow,
 So lately wounded with the piercing thorn,
 Now glory-circled with the stars of Morn,
 As at the first Creation;—radiant now!

When the slow Dawn with glimmer wan and gray
 Touched the far hills, and shafts of rosy flame
 Mingled and merged into the gold of Day,
 In haste unto the Sepulchre they came,
 Drawn by their deathless love—those hearts bereaved :
 And he, who on the Breast of the Divine
 Had leaned at supper, saw the three-fold sign,¹
 And, seeing, knew, and pondered, and believed.

And Peter, swift and eager as of old,
 Entered within the Sepulchre and found
 The linen swathes,—the myrrh in each white fold
 Untouched ;—and lo ! the napkin that was bound
 About His Head not lying with the rest,
 But there where it had lain about the Face,²
 Only encircling now an empty space;
 And Death's dim chamber vacant of its Guest.

“ Who seek Me early they shall find Me ”—sing
 O sorrowing heart that lingerest forlorn
 In quest of Him Whose tender shepherding
 Led thy tired spirit to the gates of Morn ;—
 Brought thee from outer darkness to the light,
 And drew His Hand across thy wasted years.
 “ Woman, why weepest thou ? ” forget thy tears :
 He Whom thou lovest lives in death's despite.

Lay down thy spices, for He is not here :
 Yea, even now He standeth by thy side :
 The rain is over and the flowers appear ;
 Glad Springtime follows after Winter-tide.
 "Mary!"—she turned : in that one word lay stored
 Her whole live past, the glory and the shame.
 So the Good Shepherd calls His sheep by name :
 Sing, true of heart ! for thou hast found thy Lord.

Return with songs and joy upon thy head ;³
 To all the rest the wondrous tidings tell.
 Thou hast seen Him Who liveth and was dead,
 Who holds henceforth the keys of Death and Hell.
 Tho' heaviness endureth for a night,
 At morn the almond bursteth into bloom :⁴
 The sun is streaming through the open Tomb,
 And the whole world rejoices in the Light.

O Sacred Grave ! not that blest Manger bare
 Where first th' Incarnate Word drew human breath,
 Not even Bethlehem's bright courts may share
 Thine own dread sanctities of Life and Death ;—
 The Death of Him by Whom the worlds were made,
 The new, true Life which He through Death revealed :
 Thine age-long secret thou hast well concealed ;
 For none can say "*'Twas here* that He was laid."

As when the mighty Prophet of the Lord,—
 His warfare ended and his journey done,—
 Losing the earthly, gained as his reward
 The heavenly Canaan at the setting sun ;
 Lo ! softly stealing from the far Unseen,—
 Their white wings glist'ning on the verge of night,—
 God's Angels hovered over Nebo's height,
 And left him sleeping in the lone ravine.

And no man knoweth of his grave ; no print
 Of angel footsteps on the turf-clad rock,
 Nor wind-swept cave nor sounding stream doth hint
 Where sleeps the faithful shepherd of God's Flock.
 Among those tempest-riven mountain scars,
 In some safe chasm of the hills he lies,
 Beneath the vast, unfathomable skies,
 Crowned with the Night, the silence, and the stars.

So through the ages Earth's most holy Spot⁵
 Lies hid beneath the havoc of the years.
 Though yonder knoll by "Jeremiah's Grot,"
 Whose rugged cliff its skull-shaped front uprears,
 Seemed to our hero-saint (who held at bay
 Khartoum's base rabble till a swift sword gleamed. . .)
 The Calvary of which he mused and dreamed,
 Where most his mystic fancies loved to stray ;—⁶

And though the late-discovered Tomb hard by⁷
 Counts year by year its votaries who fain
 Would think the ample dome of God's free sky
 Ceils with its blue the Grave where He hath lain ;
 Still, as of old, the heart of Christendom⁸
 Turns to these clustered glories which enshrine
 The pious deed of princely Constantine,⁹
 And Helena's bright vision. How the hum

And babble of the noisy sunlit Square
 Sinks to a muffled murmur as we pass
 Within, and seek the hallowed precincts where,
 Behind their veils of many-coloured glass
 (Like shining jewels in the fragrant gloom),
 The pendent rows of gold and silver lamps
 Gleam like the watchfires of a hundred camps
 In ceaseless vigil o'er the Saviour's Tomb !

A doorway, and a dimness—and we gaze
 Upon the secret soul¹⁰ of this vast place...
 Then onward through the labyrinthine maze
 Of stairs and passages that interlace
 The glimmering glooms and lead from shrine to shrine
 Where, under Islam's just, but alien hand,
 The rival sects of every Christian land
 With diverse rites confess One Lord divine.

Oh, by what feet have these gray stones been worn!
 These walls been witness of what countless tears!
 What gallant hearts, what sin-stained souls forlorn
 Have crossed this threshold in the long, long years!
 And who can read unmoved the chequered page,—
 The burning zeal that counted not the cost,
 The purpose unachieved, the labour lost,
 The raptures and the pains of pilgrimage!

From one frail Hermit's lips a clarion blast
 Rang through all Europe, and the nations heard.
 The tramp of myriad feet went thundering past;
 Like fire through stubble ran the kindling word:—
 "From off our brethren's necks we lift the yoke;
 We fight for Zion that forsaken lies.
 It is the Will of God; let God arise,
 And drive His foes before Him as the smoke!"

Here, where the voices of the world are still,
 And duskier grows the great Dome overhead,
 Let Memory recapture at her will
 Some far-off echoes from the years long dead.
 Their shields emblazoned with the Sacred Sign,
 Tancred and Raymond move amid the fray:
 In Tasso's verse their valour lives to-day,
 Engraved in gold in many a faultless line.

Here Godfrey found surcease from conquering ;¹¹
 Who in his reverence of soul forbore,
 Though with one voice the City named him king,
 To wear a crown where his Redeemer wore
 The Crown of thorns : none greater, none more brave
 Led on th' avenging Chivalry of God
 To free the Land those blessed Feet had trod,
 And drive the Moslem from the Holy Grave.

Church of the Holy Sepulchre ! whose name—
 Linked with man's highest hopes and deepest crimes,
 With siege and massacre, with sword and flame,—
 Is branded with the blood of those fierce times
 When Christian clashed with fiery Saracen,
 And the loud stream of battle flowed full-tide ;¹²
 Not all thy glittering shrines with all their pride
 Of costly gems, and gifts of long-forgotten men ;

Not thy world-thronged Rotunda's deep, tense hush
 On Easter Eve till, frantic with desire,
 The vast crowd sways and surges in the rush
 To snatch a sparkle of the Holy Fire ;—¹³
 Not these the thoughts which most uplift the soul !
 But that high call which roused the laggard heart,
 Bidding the dreamer choose the better part,
 And fix his gaze upon the distant goal.

Lapped in a life of smooth, inglorious ease

He heard the voice—"Unfurl thy spirit's wings!"

And as the vessel on the open seas

Leaps to the gale that round her seethes and sings,
Forth in the vanguard of the host he fared,—

Left his dear homeland for the long Crusade.

By some lone shore his nameless dust is laid,
Among the valiant who aspired and dared.

These, Lord, Thou wilt remember in the Day

Thou makest up Thy jewels: in Thy Tomb

Their sins and ours are buried, and the way

Lies open to the Land of fadeless bloom;

The Shining Land of perfect Beauty where

(Life's journey ended and its warfare past)

The heart's desire is satisfied at last:—

The pilgrim soul shall find its haven there.

Three of the stanzas were not included in the Poem as sent in, the prescribed limit being 300 lines.

*E qui l'arme sospende: e qui devoto
Il gran sepolcro adora, e scioglie il voto."*

TASSO, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Canto xx., cxliv.

NOTES.

1. "The threefold sign of the stone removed, the empty sepulchre, the grave-clothes orderly arranged, indicated something to be more fully shown."—(Westcott on *S. John* xx. 8).

2. "Nothing in the grave gave any sign of the touch of human hands. The spice remained enclosed by the linen cloths between which it had been placed. The napkin retained the form which had been given it when it had been twined round the Head of the Lord."—(Latham, *The Risen Master*, p. 34).

3. *Isaiah* xxxv. 10.

4. *Jeremiah* i. 11. The Hebrew word for "almond" signifies "that which is awake," the flower which is the first to bloom while the others are in their winter sleep.

5. "Touching the site of the Holy Sepulchre it seems impossible to attain to certainty. The tradition of more than fifteen centuries located it within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Its truth would require the site to have been outside the wall of the City.—(*S. John* xix. 17-18 and *Heb.* xiii. 12). Schick, after resisting the traditional site for nearly forty years, has been led to accept it as the true one, having satisfied himself by excavations that Calvary and the Tomb were outside the wall, though very close to it, as in *S. John* xix. 20."—Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible*, Article "Holy Sepulchre." Dr. E. Robinson, who in his *Biblical Researches in Palestine* (1841) rejected the traditional site, did not attempt to locate the Holy Places, for which "probably all search can only be in vain." The late Sir Charles Wilson (*Golgotha and the Holy Sepulchre*, p. 120) takes the same view, but adds, "No objection urged against the sites is of such a convincing nature that it need disturb the minds of those who accept in all good faith their authenticity."

6. For General Gordon's opinion as to the position of Golgotha, see his *Reflections in Palestine* (pp. vii. 2-17) and *Letters to his Sister*

(p. 109). Jeremiah's "Grotto" (in which the Prophet is said to have written the *Lamentations*) is immediately below "Skull Hill."

7. The supposed identification of "The Garden Tomb" with the Sepulchre of our Lord is since Gordon's day.—(Sanday, *Sacred Sites of the Gospel*, page 68.) Mr. Rider Haggard, among other writers, supports this theory in his *Winter Pilgrimage*; and it has found favour with many to whom the open-air site more directly appeals.—(cf. Van Dyke *Out-door Life in Palestine*.) Sir Charles Wilson has discussed the whole question very thoroughly in his book quoted above; and Dr. Sanday is "inclined to think that the traditional site has still the higher claim."—(*Sacred Sites*, p. 68).

8. "No thoughtful man can look unmoved on what has, from the time of Constantine, been revered by the larger part of the Christian world as the scene of the greatest events in the world's history."—(Dean Stanley, *Sinai and Palestine*, ch. xiv.)

9. The Emperor Constantine in 326 decided to recover the Holy Places and to build Churches in their honour. Eusebius gives a detailed description of the Basilica which the Emperor erected on the spot which pagans had desecrated by a Temple of Venus. On this site (though Fergusson argues against it) the Church of the Holy Sepulchre now stands. Helena, the Emperor's Mother, "being divinely directed by dreams (Socrates, *Eccles. Hist.* i., 17) sought carefully the Sepulchre of Christ, and after much difficulty recovered it."

10. In the small dark "Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre" is the marble sarcophagus, the central object of the devotion of every pilgrim, encasing what is held to be the Tomb of our Lord.

11. Godfrey de Bouillon, one of the chief leaders of the First Crusade, died on July 18th, 1100 (just a year after his capture of Jerusalem) and was buried in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. His tomb, desecrated in 1244, existed till the fire of 1808. For his fame after death see Archer and Kingsford's *The Crusades*, p. 102.

12. Πολλῶ ρεύματι—χρυσοῦ καναχῇ. Sophocles, *Antigone*, 130.

13. For two vivid descriptions of the Greek Easter see Conder's *Tent Work in Palestine*, and Stanley's *Sinai and Palestine*, ch. xiv.





